I was really excited when I learned that the Gospel reading assigned for this week was this parable about a wedding banquet from the book of Matthew. I was eager to preach on this story because, as fate would have it, I celebrated the one year anniversary of my own wedding just yesterday. So, you see, weddings have been on my mind.

Over the weekend Kyle and I marked the occasion by going out to dinner and exchanging gifts and eating the leftover cake that has been in my mother-in-law’s deep freeze for the last 52 weeks. We also spent a lot of time reminiscing about that special day a year ago...what was meaningful and memorable, the moments of the day that we’d give anything to re-live, and the pieces of the celebration that didn’t quite go as planned, but are fun to look back on laugh about.

Most couples, Kyle and I included, would tell you that the best part of your wedding day is the people that come. Never again will we have that many loved ones gathered in one place, to sing together and pray together and eat together and dance the night away. It’s a really special thing.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew, chapter 22, is all about the wedding guests gathered for the celebration. It’s not about the bride or groom or the centerpieces on the table. It’s about who is invited and how they respond.

But who is invited and how they respond is a strange thing in the story that we read. When the RSVPs from the initial guest list aren’t coming in, the king throwing the banquet has his slaves go out to investigate. The slaves find out that the people who received invitations simply aren’t interested in coming to the wedding, and some of the slaves are even mistreated or killed when they go door knocking to solicit responses. When you read the parable closely you’ll be struck by how much violence is a part of this day that is meant to be happy and full of love.
So when the king finds out that the A-listers don’t want to come to his son’s wedding, he does something that sounds to me to be both desperate and brilliant. He asks the slaves to go into the streets of the city and invite anyone and everyone they can find to the banquet. The slaves did just that...and the wedding hall was filled with guests, the bible says...with homeless people and underdressed people and middle class people and folks who were just passing through town...they were all gathered and invited to the feast.

This is the part of the parable that I’m most inspired by. I said that the king was brilliant to go out and grab people from off the street to fill seats at his son’s reception. It’s a radical and impressive move. Not only was he being innovative and resourceful, he was giving his people a new understanding of hospitality...painting a picture where all are truly welcome, and the ones we once thought nothing of are brought in and given a place at the table.

The flip-side of the story, of course, is that the king was also acting out of desperation. All of their first choice guests bailed, and his son’s wedding was going to be a flop unless the king did something about it. He didn’t want to be embarrassed when no one showed up to toast the newly married, and he needed a crowd to throw rice when the couple left the church. So he scavenged the streets and scrounged up some warm bodies to fill the pews. It was better than nothing and it would have to do.
There’s a new wedding trend that some are catching on to these days. Weddings that are no longer invitation-only affairs, but celebrations open to all. Have you heard of this? Brides and grooms will choose to get married as part of a plain old Sunday morning worship service. They’ll go to church as they normally would, and a typical crowd of people will show up…the whole congregation, a representation of the wider community. Some people know the couple well, others don’t. Some are rich, some are poor. Some are dressed for a wedding, others just crawled out of bed, not even knowing that what they would experience at worship would include an exchange of marriage vows.

What do you think about that? About weddings, and receptions, as public events? Where anyone can come and all are welcome. If a woman walks in off of the street to visit the church, and finds herself at a marriage ceremony embedded into the worship service, she suddenly become just as much a witness to the couple’s vows as the best man or maid of honor.

It was an idea that ran threw my mind as Kyle and I were planning our wedding. If wedding ceremonies are worship services, and if any and all are invited there…and if the meal and dance afterward are meant to be an extension of the radical hospitality and abundance that we receive from Christ at the communion table…then shouldn’t all be welcome to participate in the marriage rite and the reception that follows? In fact, shouldn’t all be encouraged to come?
Even after prayerful deliberation about it, Kyle and I decided to go a more conventional route...our wedding would happen midday on a Saturday, not during Sunday morning worship. We would stick to our guest list and invite the people that we were closest to. I suppose it was a logistical issue. If we invited a few strangers we would have to invite them all...and then where would we put them all? The church could only hold so many. Maybe more importantly it was a money issue. How would we possibly plan for and afford meals for a reception that was advertized as an open invitation? We had to draw the line somewhere. There were limited seats and limited funds. So we put together a guest list that was based on a criteria of familiarity and friendship. If we didn’t know you that well we couldn’t justify paying for your plate at dinner, and you didn’t make the cut.

The part of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew that bothers me most is what happens in the last few verses. After the king has welcomed these new and unlikely guests, he sees a man who is not wearing a wedding robe. The king questions the man about his informal attire. Nevermind that the man was probably blindsided by the last minute invitation, and had no time to find a more suitable outfit. The king deems the man unacceptable for his son’s wedding, he has him bound and thrown out of the party.

I’m struck by how brazenly the king moves from open invitation to shoving a guest out the door because he failed to abide by a certain dress code. Frankly, I’m amazed at how quickly the minds of many of this story’s characters change. Why wouldn’t those folks on the first guest list want to come? How could they fail to recognize the honor of being invited to a royal wedding? And how could they not understand how much their presence, or their absence, would matter?
A few weeks ago I attended a conference where I heard a seminary professor talk at length about how we live in this age of “discernment.” That is to say...we have so many choices at our fingertips...so many places we could go on a Saturday night, so many people we can connect with, so many careers we could pursue...that we are in the business of triaging our lives. Weddings are a prime example of this. Whether you’re the one putting together a guest list, or you’re on the receiving end of the invitation...you have to make choices. How many people do I send invites to? How much can I afford to spend on a banquet? Who do I consider my friends and family? Should I respond to this invitation or that? Should I go to the wedding? Or should I wait to see if a better offer comes up?

These are the kinds of questions that characterize an age of discernment. Where the priority is exercising our prerogative, and the freedom to change our minds as quickly and as frequently as we want. It would seem to me that the wedding guests who turned down their invitations early in the bible story felt just as entitled to make the choice that was best for them as the king felt empowered to throw a man out of the reception hall almost as soon as he arrived. It’s all about weighing your options, and making the best choice for you.

The last verse of today’s parable is a familiar one: “Many are called, but few are chosen,” it says. We hone in on that last word, “chosen.” Because we want to be one of the chosen, and maybe even more importantly these days we want to feel privileged enough to be able to choose.

It’s rare that we talk as much about being called. Many are called, the verse says. But because so many are, being called must be less important and less glamorous than being chosen.
If this morning’s bible reading is first and foremost about hospitality, and I’m convinced that it is, then it matters a lot that many are called. If it’s ultimately about hospitality, then decisions we have to make in life, about which weddings to attend, or who to count as friends on our guest lists are less about choice and choosing, and more about call and commitment. In this “age of discernment” we get so defensive about words like “ought and should and duty and obligation.” But maybe the best news in this story is not that we are one of the chosen few, but that we are one of many who are called. Being called is a gift, because it means that the agony of choosing has already been done for us. We have no other choice than to go to the wedding, or invite the unlikely guest into our own party. And sure, we might miss out on a better offer, or risk having someone seated next to us who is dressed a little differently. But that’s what makes the hospitality so radical and so faithful…it’s sacrificial, and at times inconvenient and even uncomfortable…and yet this is the kind of hospitality that makes a difference in the world.

Looking back on our wedding day a year later, it’s tough to say how Kyle and I did at being hospitable wedding hosts. Sometimes I think we did alright...we invited a lot of people and tried to spend as much time with our guest as we could. We certainly didn’t throw anyone out for not wearing the right clothes.

But sometimes I think we could have done better. Your own wedding is maybe the hardest place to practice hospitality. Because everyone’s telling you that it’s your day, and it’s your choice, and it’s up to you. The reality is that it’s God’s day...like every other day. And even in a white dress and fancy vail you are not one of the chosen few, you are one of the many called.
It’s those times when we’re tempted to believe that we are one of the special ones that our hospitality toward others is most important...like on your wedding day, or on your graduation day, or on the day that you get your first job offer or your acceptance letter to graduate school. You are one of the many who are called...to serve, and to invite, and to respond to the invitation with gratitude and humility.

The king is hosting a banquet. You are one of the many called to serve. And that, my friends, is good news.

Amen.
Morning Worship  
Monday, October 13, 2014

Prelude  
*Prelude on Union Seminary* by Charles Callahan  
Marilyn Schempp, Organist

Welcome/Announcements

Invocation

Special Music  
*How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place*  
by Johannes Brahms arr Nora Kile  
Flute Choir directed by Emily Anderson

Call to Worship
L: All you looking for comfort,  
C: Find here the arms of a loving God.
L: All you looking for direction,  
C: Find here the hand of God to guide you.
L: All you hoping to end loneliness,  
C: Find here the embrace of God and new friends.
L: All you searching for meaning,  
C: Find here the Lord of Life and the Revealer of Truth.
L: All you seeking happiness,  
C: Find here the deep joy of the Risen Christ and the lasting peace of forgiveness.

Hymn  
"Jesus, Come! For We Invite You"  
ELW #312 vv. 1, 3, & 4

Scripture  
Matthew 22: 1-14

Sermon  
Pastor Ann Elizabeth Rosendale

Hymn  
"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"  
ELW #244 vv. 1, 2, & 4

Prayer

Benediction

Postlude  
"Now Thank We All Our God"  
by Johann Pachelbel arr Kathy Farmer  
Flute Choir directed by Emily Anderson

Dismissal
WORSHIP SCHEDULE

Tues, Oct 14  Common Ground, 7:30 pm
Wed, Oct 15  Holy Communion, 10 am, Carrie Hall
Fri, Oct 17  Worship Service, 10 am, Leah Murfield

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Come listen to one campus’s unique CAMPAIGN FOR AWARENESS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE, and then participate in a discussion with Beth Torkelson, Assistant Dean of Students, and Beth McDuffie, Adjunct Professor of Religion, about sexuality at Augustana: what’s important, what’s problematic, and what simply needs to be talked about. Bring your questions! Thursday, October 16, at 7pm in the 3-in-1 room.

WORSHIP AT ST DYSMAS: An opportunity to worship and fellowship at the South Dakota State Penitentiary the evening of November 6th. **Sign-up forms are due October 17th.** Come see Patty in the Chapel Office with Driver’s ID in hand to get signed up! Truly a safe, eye-opening experience!

Wednesday, October 15 at 6:30 p.m. Pastor Paul and Sam Ogdie will have another informational meeting on walking the CAMINO DE SANTIAGO in Northern Spain. The meeting will be held in HUMN 301. Afterwards (for those who are interested) we will be showing the movie "The Way" that tells the story of an individual walking the entire Camino. Stay as long as you can and bring an interested friend. The deadline is nearing and if you or a friend have interest, please come and ask questions.

BETTER TOGETHER AUGUSTANA COLLEGE (BTAC), our interfaith ministry on campus, will have its next meeting on Thursday, October 23 at 7 pm in the Halverson Room (of the Commons). We will update you on upcoming events and engage in interfaith storytelling. Email Elise Sperling or Lynette Apio with any questions you have about BTAC!

HAVE A SAFE & RELAXING FALL BREAK!!